

1-1-1984

Some Remarks About the Unutterable

Frances Berenson
University of London

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/phil_ex

 Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

Repository Citation

Berenson, Frances (1984) "Some Remarks About the Unutterable," *Philosophic Exchange*: Vol. 15 : No. 1 , Article 4.
Available at: http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/phil_ex/vol15/iss1/4

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @Brockport. It has been accepted for inclusion in Philosophic Exchange by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @Brockport. For more information, please contact kmyers@brockport.edu.



The College at
BROCKPORT
STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK



Frances Berenson
University of London

Some Remarks About the Unutterable

Frances Berenson

The shadowy figure of the 'subjectivist' has for long haunted moral philosophy. His lack of substance is mainly due to a complete lack of clarity as to the real character of that figure and philosophers, generally speaking, are most reluctant to pursue any such theme convinced that to do so would inevitably lead to some form of unacceptable relativism which, it is argued quite rightly, involves a radical abnegation of any kind of objectivity.

Objectivists believe that a system can be established where objective moral principles can be found which would rest on a firm foundation of rationality, apply without exception, provide answers to moral questions as they arose and, above all, that they would have to be formulated from a strictly objective perspective (whatever that may be). They would be principles which all conscientious moral reasoners would agree on and, as is demanded in most recent ethical theories, they would have to be directed towards society in general rather than to individuals.

I wish to attempt to give the elusive shadow some substance in *objective* terms. In other words, I hope to show that a certain kind of moral subjectivism is not only entirely compatible with but also dependent on objectivity. I shall outline a particular subjectivist approach to morality based on a comparison of some thoughts of Wittgenstein and of Kierkegaard.

The problem with most so called 'systems' of ethics is that apart from supplying a priori rules and principles, they also suggest justifications in the form of trying to supply an answer to the question 'Why should I act morally?' Thus Utilitarianism has as its end the greatest happiness for the greatest number, an ultimately meaningless end. Kant provides a definite purpose or product of the Moral Law the summum bonum which involves achieving our own perfection and the happiness of others, and so on.

Any attempt to answer the question 'Why should I act morally?' demands *some kind* of justification yet the importance of moral integrity should be self-evident. It is as much a part of us as the language we speak. By being language speakers, we acquire the concepts of right and wrong. What we choose to *do* is another matter but the possibility of choosing the ethical way is open to everyone who possesses the concepts involved. When we ask: 'Why should I act morally?', this is another way of asking - 'What advantage does morality bring?'. The very form of this question implies that we must look outside morality for something on which morality is to be based.

But the instant we do this, then what is commended is not morality *itself* for, surely, if the commendation is in terms of some *further* advantage, then the connection between *that* advantage and morality can only be a contingent one. It is quite immaterial how strong a contingent connection it is, it will still not be *morality itself* which is being commended.

The above issue lies at the centre of Kierkegaard's ethics. His notion of doublemindedness focuses precisely on what is involved in willing the good for the sake of the reward or for fear of punishment, i.e., for some further end. He calls these barriers to willing one thing - the Good. Willing the good for the sake of the reward is double-minded because it is not *simply* that two things are willed. If the reward could be obtained without willing the good then the good would not be willed at all, it is removed here. The same applies in the case of punishment; the genuine good is not willed. One should not fear punishment, one should fear to do wrong.

False shame is another way of being double-minded. Kierkegaard writes:

Each one who is not more ashamed before himself than before all others, will end by becoming the slave of men. For to be more ashamed in the presence of others than when alone, what else is this than to be more ashamed of seeming than of being? And turned about, should not a man be more ashamed of what he is than of what he seems?¹

The rigid following of an a priori general rule, e.g., doing one's duty, can, at times, completely distort any moral worth an action may have. Yet the notion that duty is of central importance in moral actions has a long history. For Kant only actions done out of duty qualify as morally praiseworthy actions. D. Gauthier² in a recent article argues that duty has a central role to play in morality. He writes that allurements are not duty's way. Morality insists that we restrain our pursuits of self-interest. By startling contrast P. Winch³ gives an excellent example of how doing one's duty may completely distort the moral content of an action. Mrs. Solness in Ibsen's *The Master Builder* is obsessed with the notion of acting for the sake of duty. Her actions lack any spontaneity or any feeling of warmth towards others. They cease to have any connection with a genuine wish to do what one thinks is right; it is done to cover up resentments within her. When she is thanked for an overtly kind act her reply, that she is only doing her duty, deeply hurts the other person by its coldness and utter impersonality; it has no connection with morality whatsoever.

Merely taking part in a ritual, like going to church every Sunday, is

not a moral action nor being coerced into something because one is told that it is one's duty. The notion of duty as presented here is a complicated one. It can, perhaps, be explicated in terms of what it is *not*. Kierkegaard gives a satirical example of what is so often taken as doing one's duty and which has nothing to do with morality. He asks us to imagine a society of talking geese who went to church each Sunday and thus, having done their duty, occupied themselves for the rest of the week with getting soft and fat.⁴

In order to do one's duty, one must not only see it as a duty, but sense it, feel it as a duty. A duty done without this special understanding is in no sense connected with one's moral integrity. Judge William, who represents the ethical way of life in Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*, says:

I have not been afraid of duty, it has not appeared before me as an enemy which would disturb the bit of happiness and joy I had hoped to preserve through life; rather it has appeared before me as a friend, a confidante. . .⁵

The notion of duty, as usually presented, demands a sort of constant battle between what one is and what one does or ought to do. It demands a constant subduing of one's wishes for the sake of what duty demands of us. 'Duty' is supposed to guarantee an independent, rational approach, independent from subjective opinions, safeguarding moral judgments from being based on 'mere opinions' where what one feels is right, is right. What is completely overlooked in such accounts is that various opinions held must be about something intelligible and thus available for rational discussion, argument and judgment as to their validity; all of which involves objectivity rather than some kind of irrational subjectivity.

The distinction between what one is and what one does results directly from the kind of accounts, given above, of the role which duty plays in moral action. Having established this distinction, the concern is then exclusively with the latter which is supposed to represent the only objectively promising way for theories of ethics in general. But our particular judgments of good and evil, right or wrong, and our decisions *how to act* (what one does) are not independent of our attitudes to life as a whole. Both Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard were most interested in the importance of our attitudes to life and what they have to say reveals that they were deeply aware of a vital link or connection between what we are which enables us and dictates to us how we arrive at decisions on how to act in situations with a moral content.

Wittgenstein's enigmatic remark that 'Ethics and Aesthetics are one'⁶, was designed to lay stress on the vital relation between what

one is and one's actions. This remark has often been objected to via arguments which stress the alleged contrast between ethics and aesthetics thus, it is thought, denying any relation between them. It is argued that ethical judgments are made by reference to *general principles* while aesthetic judgments are made by reference to the *very particular features* of what is judged. Further, while in ethical situations we act towards *some end*, in an aesthetic situation we experience *something for its own sake*. The conclusion reached from these contrasts is that ethics and aesthetics cannot be one because the differences existing between them are too pronounced.⁷

This line of argument rests on a crucial mistake. Wittgenstein's notion of oneness is not of a complete identity of characteristics but of a common fundamental approach. Its most succinct description is given in the 1929 *Lecture on Ethics*⁸, where he stipulates that he will use the term 'ethics' in a sense which includes what he believes to be the most essential part of what is generally called Aesthetics. Ethics, he says, is 'the enquiry into what is valuable, or, into what is really important..., the enquiry into the meaning of life, or into what makes life worth living...'⁹ The judgment that something is ethically good is not one that states that something is good for some purpose or end but that it is good *simpliciter*, irrespective of any purpose it may fulfil, irrespective of any further *end*. He rejects totally the kind of characterization of ethics given above, i.e., the contrast between the ethical as action towards some end and the aesthetic as 'for its own sake'. He is mostly concerned, as is Kierkegaard, with how one perceives particular features of a moral situation (dependent on what one is) and taking decisions of how to act.

At this point one might object that if the above arguments are rejected then one is left with no way of appeal to any valid rules for judgments of right and wrong and that what follows from such a rejection is that morality is not a subject which need concern us seriously, that there is, perhaps, something strained and artificial about it. If there is no such thing as the objective good then there is no point in concerning ourselves philosophically with something that has no independent existence. In other words, if we reject the notion of duty, or that of principles which are statable in propositional, general terms, then the only alternative is some kind of subjectivity where we, necessarily, descend into the realm of vague opinions, which completely lack any objective substance.

Wittgenstein, in the last part of the *Tractatus* says:

What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence.¹⁰

This was generally taken to mean that since we cannot express ethical matters in general, universal propositions, there is really nothing

here of philosophical significance, i.e., the whole notion of ethics is spurious. What was missed, however, is that there must be *something to be passed over* in silence.

Both Wittgenstein's and Kierkegaard's approach to ethics are certainly not systems. They try to convey what is meant by moral integrity, and what does not count as a moral action and why. They try to describe the issues involved in the ethical way of life in a manner which brings out aspects of the greatest importance, aspects which are completely missed in most so called 'systems' of ethics.

Engelmann captures beautifully the significance of Wittgenstein's remark:

A whole generation of disciples was able to take Wittgenstein for a positivist because he has something of enormous importance in common with the positivists: he draws a line between what we can speak about and what we must be silent about just as they do. The difference is only that they have nothing to be silent about. Positivism holds - and this is its essence - that what we can speak about is all that matters in life. *Whereas Wittgenstein passionately believes that all that really matters in human life is precisely what, in his view, we must be silent about.* When he nevertheless takes immense pains to delimit the unimportant, it is not the coastline of that island which he is bent on surveying with such meticulous accuracy, but the boundary of the ocean.¹¹

Wittgenstein says:

The sense of the world must lie outside the world. In the world everything is as it is, and everything happens as it does happen; in it no value exists - and if it did exist, it would have no value....
It must lie outside the world.

And so it is impossible for there to be propositions of ethics. Propositions can express nothing that is higher. It is clear that ethics cannot be put into words. Ethics is transcendental.¹²

And again:

There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They *make themselves manifest*.¹³

Wittgenstein states clearly and unequivocally that there are no a priori facts in ethics, nor can there be any. Now, if something cannot be said to be right or wrong *as a matter of fact*, then we cannot make any factual and final judgments nor lay down universal rules. For Wittgenstein it is the unsayable alone which has value. But what cannot be said, i.e., stated in propositional form, may, nevertheless, be shown, explained, described or otherwise conveyed.

Stephen Toulmin in an article on Wittgenstein writes:

Even in his last years Wittgenstein still seemed to believe what he had said as early as the *Tractatus* - namely, that whatever belongs to the realm of the 'higher', whatever has 'value' lies outside the boundaries of the utterable - he continued, like Kierkegaard, to seek some alternative way of conveying what could not be stated. And, since he himself was a man of strong moral passions, it is not surprising to find that, away from the formal lecture room, he exemplified in his own person that human tendency *Gegen die Grenzen der Sprache anzurennen*, which was, in his eyes, one manifestation of the fundamental ethico-religious impulse.¹⁴

Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard share a view which is crucial for what follows. The former says that if someone tells me he believes in God and then asks if I also believe, my answer may be that I do not believe. But that answer does not mean that he is wrong in his belief. It is just that I fail to understand what is involved here, for him. I have no way of judging him to be wrong. Kierkegaard echoes this when he says that in trying to judge others we are really judging ourselves. He means here that I am often in no position to judge the other man as I may not be able to know every aspect of a given situation the way the agent does, therefore, in judging, I use my own criteria, the way I see it, the way I would choose to act, depending on what sort of person I am.

By quoting some extracts from Wittgenstein's letters to Engelmann it can, perhaps, be made clearer what he himself felt:

The poem by Uhland is really magnificent. And this is how it is: if only you do not try to utter what is unutterable then *nothing* gets lost. But the unutterable will be unutterably-contained in what has been uttered.¹⁵

From this letter it seems that Wittgenstein believes that poetry can express far more than everyday language. Kierkegaard, who tried to convey something about the unutterable called himself a poet.

I have been morally dead for more than a year! From that you can judge for yourself whether I am fine or not.... I had a task, did not do it, and now the failure is wrecking my life. I ought to have done something positive with my life.... My life has really become meaningless and so it consists only of futile episodes.¹⁶

.... I have now read *The King of the Dark Chamber* (by Tagore). The play has not really made a deep impression on me.... It seems to me as if all that wisdom has come out of the icebox; I should not be surprised to learn that he got it all secondhand by reading and listening (exactly as so many among us acquire their knowledge of Christian wisdom) rather than from his own genuine *feeling*. Perhaps I don't understand his tone; to me it does not ring like the tone of a man possessed by the truth.¹⁷

This particular letter, perhaps more than anything else, expresses the great similarity between Wittgenstein's and Kierkegaard's thought. This is exactly what Kierkegaard takes to be subjective truth, the only truth possible in Ethics. This is, exactly as Wittgenstein expresses it, why Kierkegaard condemns the Christianity of the established Church, as second-hand acquisition of knowledge through what is preached at one, without feeling and thinking for oneself.

In a letter to Ficker - a would-be publisher of the *Tractatus* - Wittgenstein explains what the work is about:

The book's point is an ethical one. I once meant to include in the preface a sentence which is not in fact there now but which I will write out for you here, because it will perhaps be a key to the work for you. What I meant to write, then, was this: My work consists of two parts: the one presented here plus all that I have not written. And it is precisely this second part that is the important one. My book draws limits to the sphere of the ethical from the inside as it were, and I am convinced that this is the *ONLY rigorous* way of drawing those limits. In short, I believe that where many others today are just gassing, I have managed in my book to put everything firmly into place by being silent about it.... For now, I would recommend you to read the *preface* and the *conclusion*, because they contain the most direct expression of the point of the book.¹⁸

In his lecture on Ethics, Wittgenstein tries to show what sort of thing can be conveyed and how we try to express something about the

unutterable. When discussing the word 'good' he draws a distinction between its ordinary use and its ethical use. He calls the everyday use, the trivial or *relative sense* and the ethical - the ethical or absolute *sense*. The relative sense of 'good' is used when speaking of something which fulfils its function, e.g., a good knife is a sharp knife, the right road is relative to a certain goal. He brings this distinction out by examples. If I deliberately choose to play tennis badly and say so, then no-one can blame me for it, except to say: 'That's all right then'. If, however, I choose to tell a preposterous lie then another person will respond by saying: 'Well, you ought to behave better'. This is an absolute judgment of value, whereas the previous example was a relative judgment, a mere statement of fact and, as such, when put in a different form, it loses the appearance of a judgment of value altogether. No statement of fact can ever be a judgment of absolute value. In ethics there are no facts and therefore the 'good' cannot be defined.

We can speak in metaphors in order to convey the ethical sense. The ethical belongs to a special form of life. What in Wittgenstein's sense we cannot speak about, is trying to define the 'good', trying to find rigid, *a priori* rules as to how one should act but this does not preclude us from trying to convey our feelings in a given situation nor trying to convey, to show what is involved in the ethical form of life as a given person sees it. It is essential, however, that one should only speak for oneself. Kierkegaard, who fully shares this view, always speaks to the solitary individual on whom alone his own ethical decisions rest as does the responsibility for them. He writes on the first page of *Purity of Heart*: 'To that solitary individual this little work is dedicated'.

Wittgenstein speaks of the experience of feeling absolutely safe. We all know what it means to feel safe in ordinary life. To be safe means that it is physically impossible that certain things should happen to us, e.g., being run over by a car when I am safe in my room, but it makes no sense to say that I am absolutely safe, whatever happens. To say this, is to misuse the word 'safe'. Yet we use the word allegorically when speaking of feeling absolutely safe and it conveys a meaning. One might want to say that if certain experiences make us attribute qualities to them which we call absolute, this shows that by the words we use, we do not mean nonsense. This, however, is not because we have not yet discovered the correct logical analysis of what we mean by ethical expressions but that no such analysis is possible because, if it were, we would then be back to dealing with facts, not values. As Wittgenstein puts it:

The very nonsensicality of the expressions used is the very essence of these expressions. For all I wanted to do with them was just to go beyond the world and that is to say,

beyond significant language. My whole tendency, and I believe the tendency of all men who ever tried to write or talk Ethics, was to run against the boundaries of language. Ethics, so far as it springs from the desire to say something about the ultimate meaning of life, the absolute good, the absolute valuable, can be no science. What it says does not add to our knowledge. But it is a document of a tendency in the human mind which I personally cannot help respecting deeply....¹⁹

Because Wittgenstein says that he speaks in the first person in his lecture on ethics as he believes this to be essential, he can only speak and appear as a person speaking for himself, and because this attitude is for Kierkegaard, most important of all, it is what he tries to show throughout his works when he continually speaks to the individual alone - it is precisely for these reasons that they are both so often accused of subjectivism. 'Subjectivism', as a term, stands for many and varied doctrines but they both use it in a very specific way. Kierkegaard's distinction between the subjective and the objective is Wittgenstein's dichotomy of the absolute and the relative. They are both concerned with subjective truth - a notion which, as used here, has been continuously misunderstood and as a result wrongly dismissed on the grounds of having no objective basis whatsoever.

Kierkegaard's view of objectivity is expressed clearly in the Postscript. He writes:

*The objective accent falls on WHAT is said,
the subjective accent on HOW it is said.*²⁰

The HOW is a striving. These are in no way incompatible with 'objectivity' in the accepted sense. A few pages later, Kierkegaard compares the man who follows what others do, to one who at a banquet does not know what cutlery to use and looks desperately at others in order to imitate them. This tendency to the objective (in the special sense) turns everyone into an observer so that he becomes a copy of his fellows, unable to think for himself. This kind of objectivity has a more serious consequence because the individual ceases to be fully responsible for his actions as his actions become *mere* imitations, they are done without understanding and without feeling.

Kierkegaard's use of the term 'subjective' involves showing the importance of language and of rational choice. In the Journal for 1840 he states the importance of language. He says that for philosophers to be *unbiased*, they must take account of language and its whole significance in relation to speculations. As he puts it:

... we sometimes find the mistaken tendency of not wishing to accept language as the freely appropriated 'given', but of giving it to oneself,... where it easily ends in silence..., or in personal isolation in complete gibberish.²¹

He goes on to say that any arbitrarily formed language is bound to fail because it lacks what he calls, a common denominator; for in language 'totum est parte sua prius', i.e., the structure, like Wittgenstein's rules of grammar, etc., is all important. This, I take to be the forerunner of the 'Private Language' argument.

Kierkegaard's conception of subjectivity and truth points in a totally different direction from that of subjectivism which leads to scepticism and relativism. In the *Journals* he says:

'I certainly do not deny that I recognise an *imperative of understanding...*, but it must be taken up into my life, and that is what I now recognise as the most important thing.²²

By this he means that having a background of language and understanding which involves standards of right and wrong, acquired inter-subjectively, we then have to use this understanding in order to make our own decisions in each individual case. From Kierkegaard's writings, particularly the *Purity of Heart*, it seems clear that a very strict rational approach is required, an open-eyed facing up to all aspects of oneself and the situation one finds oneself in. Purity of heart is the exposure to oneself of any double-mindedness an action may have, the exposure of evasion on the agent's part, or self-deception, or any other kind of self-excuses which prevent us from willing the good alone. Kierkegaard does not specify in any way what the good is. He leaves this to each individual because he recognises that the good cannot be spoken about. He only shows what is at stake - the individual having an idea which governs his mode of life and a total commitment to this idea.

The above view of the 'Good' could be objected to on the grounds that whatever one decides is good, is good and, therefore, anything goes. The social dimension of an individual is crucial here. What one can *meaningfully* say or do, depends on inter-subjectivity, on the people one lives with, has relationships with. One's relationships with other people teach us about standards which are available to us and which are intelligible through the common language spoken. Moral feelings and commitment go together with objective moral concepts; they are inseparable. Morality is social but I do not mean by this that it is 'societal'; bound to any given society.²³ By 'social' I mean relationships between individual and individual, person to person; in other words, lived relationships with real people, not with abstractions.

However individual an action may be, it has still to be understood even though, perhaps, not approved of by others around us, it must be considered meaningful as opposed to what Kierkegaard calls 'gibberish'. If a given action is such that others cannot understand how a decision was taken then we feel the need to ask all sorts of questions. Such a procedure underlines objectivity. To illustrate — Kierkegaard speaks of Brutus' son who conspired, while his father was consul, to restore the king of Rome to the throne, for which Brutus ordered his execution. We can understand to a large extent the pain it caused him to sentence his own son, yet he did what he saw to be right and just. Kierkegaard goes on:

... if Brutus had had a righteous son and yet would have ordered the lictors to execute him - who would have understood him?²⁴

For Kierkegaard, false ideas refute themselves in experience and lead to a disintegration of a personality instead to its unification. He also points out that if an individual realises his ideas to have been wrong, then he must re-think his position. The notion of remorse is very important in his works; it is closely bound up with his insistence that the individual constantly examine his ideas for signs of insincerity or bias. In *Either/Or* he writes:

..., it is very important to test oneself, lest some day one might have to beat a retreat to the point from which one started, and might have reason to thank God if one had to reproach oneself for nothing worse than a waste of time.²⁵

It has been said of Kierkegaard that his notion of choice is that of an arbitrary, criterionless choice, whatever that means. This criticism could, perhaps, be levelled against Sartre but certainly not against Kierkegaard. The following, rather lengthy extract, makes it quite clear that choice is certainly never to be arbitrary:

For me the instant of choice is very serious, not so much on account of the rigorous cogitation involved in weighing the alternatives, not on account of the multiplicity of thoughts which attach themselves to every link in the chain, but rather because there is danger afoot, danger that the next instant it may not be equally in my power to choose.... For to think that for an instant one can keep one's personality a blank, or that strictly speaking one can break off and bring to a halt the course of the personal life, is a delusion. The personality is already interested in the choice before one chooses, and when the choice is post-

poned the personality chooses unconsciously, or the choice is made by obscure powers within us.²⁶

Choice then, is definitely rational and objective; unconscious or arbitrary choice is wrong and to be guarded against.

Kierkegaard despises compromise of the sort 'I shall do both/and'. The choice has to be a definite either/or. Either the life of calculated pursuit of pleasure or a life of self-realisation through the pursuit of a worthwhile idea, a whole way of life. He is against any form of an aimless life. Life must have a purpose, The Good, whatever that may be. He who chooses the ethical, chooses the Good but here the Good is entirely abstract, only its being is posited. So nothing can be said about what the Good is, this must be passed over in silence. Here the same view is expressed as that in Wittgenstein's 38th letter, quoted previously. In the *Diapsalmata* we find a passage which summarises the essence of the kind of ethics under discussion. Kierkegaard says that his soul always turns to the Old Testament and to Shakespeare:

I feel that those who speak there are at least human beings: they hate, they love, they murder their enemies, and curse their descendants throughout all generations, they sin.²⁷

He is most opposed to the drifter, the person who avoids any sort of responsibility or commitment and, therefore, does what he is told. He writes:

Let it be your comfort and mine that the highest and most beautiful things in life are not to be heard about nor read about but, if one will, may be lived.²⁸

This is remarkably like Wittgenstein's view - that which cannot be uttered, can nevertheless be lived, ethics is action, a vital part of what one is and how one lives. The distinction that I have been most concerned with in this paper is that between moral theorists with their abstract schema or systems and an ethic which is directed towards individuals who live their lives through personal relationships with others and who make moral choices about lived situations. Given the central importance of that distinction it might, perhaps, be captured or highlighted by an analogy from Aesthetics. R.K. Elliott, in his article 'The Critic and the Lover of Art' writes:

It is possible to distinguish two common types of approach of art. One I attribute to a person I shall call 'the critic' since critics often adopt it, the other to a person whom I shall call 'the lover of art'. Nowadays critics assert not that

the work must impose its authority on a totally disinterested spectator but that it must be received sympathetically 'on its own terms'. This is a fair description of the lover's attitude. The difference between them emerges in their respective practice. Ultimately it involves differences in the kind of being attributed to the work and in the part which Art plays in the life of the individual,.... The work becomes a part of his life not in the trivial sense that it has occupied his time but in the sense that it has engaged him in his depth and, it seems, has revealed its own depth to him.²⁹

In a similar way, both the moral theorist and Kierkegaard's and Wittgenstein's solitary individual, receive morality 'on its own terms'. The very telling differences between them emerges in their respective attitude. Ultimately, and crucially, everything depends on the kind of being attributed to ethics, to other persons and to the part that other persons play in one's life within personal relationships. These do not set up any kind of general, invariable ends or anything like it. They are lived, not in the trivial sense of occupying one's time but in the sense that one becomes engaged in them deeply and unreservedly; where one lives one's life from within a definite commitment.

In summary, what emerges from Wittgenstein's and Kierkegaard's writings is the importance of moral integrity in life, the need for the individual to stand alone when confronted with ethical problems, the impracticability of general rules of judgment but not of rules of language and of criteria which form a common background of intelligibility. Duty is part of the ethical form of life but it must not be done simply as a duty without full understanding of what that involves. The notions of temporal and eternal in Kierkegaard find a parallel in Wittgenstein, the temporal being that which belongs to the world of propositions and the eternal that which lies outside the world, that which has value. It is Wittgenstein's dichotomy of the relative and the absolute.

The dominating thought in Kierkegaard's ethics is total commitment to will to be and remain loyal to the Good. Commitment to a certain degree is double-minded. The demand for this is also present in Wittgenstein. Engelmann describes his attitude to life:

... an ethical totalitarianism in all questions, a single-minded and painful preservation of the purity of the uncompromising demands of ethics, in agonizing awareness of one's own permanent failure to measure up to them. This is the demand Wittgenstein makes on himself.³⁰

Both philosophers realise this constant failure. Kierkegaard starts several chapters in *Purity of Heart* with 'If it be possible for a man really in truth to will one thing, he must will the Good in truth'. For both of them ethical action exists and the striving for it is what counts in life. As Kierkegaard expresses it, a man has the task not by word, nor merely by intention but by the sincere, inner concentration of his own life to unconditionally serve the Good in action. Commitment can only be subjective although the object of it is arrived at by rational, objective choice. This is the special kind of subjectivity that Kierkegaard insists on.

Wittgenstein also stresses this when he insists on speaking in the first person on ethical issues. We cannot always be in a position to judge another person's actions as we may be unable to fully understand what he feels in a given situation nor fully grasp the perspective from which he views it, e.g., the religious perspective. When disagreements arise, certain explanations are possible because the common language we speak, but often they are only possible up to a point. Wittgenstein illustrates this.³¹ When one says that a piece of music makes one feel wobbly - one explanation could be - 'It is the 3 against 4 rhythm'. If the person concerned says: 'Yes, it is this peculiar rhythm I meant', we have an explanation but if he does not agree, this would not be an explanation. This is also relevant to the notion of commitment. Malcolm, in his account of Wittgenstein's death says that he found his remark: 'Tell them I had a wonderful life', strangely moving and mysterious, as his life was a tortured and unhappy one.³² Here it is the worthwhileness of one's pursuits in spite of difficulties, the total commitment to it, which brings this particular kind of happiness or self-realisation. It can only be understood by someone who understands how a given pursuit could do this. We may think a particular way of life a waste but as long as we can grasp how someone else could be happy, we understand the feelings of the man concerned. If we cannot understand then nothing more can be offered by way of explanation, the showing how. This is what Kierkegaard means when he speaks of the serious observer, to whom it is possible to make oneself intelligible at a distance and to whom one can talk in silence. He uses the pseudonym Johannes de Silentio to underline the point. If this special understanding is present then communication is possible, then something can be conveyed, if not - then nothing more can be shown and must be passed over in silence - unuttered.

Notes

¹ S. Kierkegaard - *Purity of Heart*, Collins Fontana Books 1966, p. 79.

² D. Gauthier - 'The Need for Morality: The Case for the Competitive Market', in

Philosophic Exchange, Vol. 3 No. 3 Summer 1982, SUNY Brockport, p. 41.

- 3 P. Winch - *Moral Integrity*, Inaugural Lecture, Basil Blackwell Oxford 1968, p. 12.
- 4 S. Kierkegaard - *Journals 1850-1854*, in *A Kierkegaard Anthology*, ed. R. Bretall, O.U.P. 1947 p. 433
- 5 S. Kierkegaard - *Either/Or* - trans. W. Lowrie, O.U.P. 1944 Vol. 2 p. 128.
- 6 L. Wittgenstein - *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D.F. Pears & B.F. McGuinness, Routledge and Kegan Paul London 1961, 7, p. 151.
- 7 These and other distinctions are discussed in S. Hampshire, 'Logic and Appreciation', in *Aesthetics and Language*, ed. W. Elton, Basil Blackwell Oxford 1967 Chapter 7.
- 8 L. Wittgenstein - 'Lecture on Ethics', in *Philosophical Review* Vol. 74 1965 p. 4-5
- 9 L. Wittgenstein - op. cit., p. 5
- 10 L. Wittgenstein - *Tractatus*, 6.421
- 11 P. Engelmann - op. cit. p. 97
- 12 L. Wittgenstein - *Tractatus*, 6.41 and 6.42
- 13 L. Wittgenstein - *Tractatus*, 6.522
- 14 S. Toulmin - 'Men and Ideas', in *Encounter*, January 1969, p. 64
- 15 P. Engelmann - op. cit. Letter 6
- 16 P. Engelmann - op. cit. Letter 38
- 17 P. Engelmann - op. cit. Letter 43
- 18 Quoted in P. Engelmann, op. cit. p. 143
- 19 L. Wittgenstein - 'Lecture on Ethics' p. 12
- 20 S. Kierkegaard - *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. and ed. D.F. Swenson, Oxford University Press 1941 p. 181
- 21 S. Kierkegaard - *Journals*, in op. cit. July 1840, p. 12
- 22 S. Kierkegaard - *Journals*, in op. cit., Galleleie, August 1, 1835, p. 5
- 23 This is a very complex issue which I cannot pursue here. Please see my Royal Institute of Philosophy Lecture 'Understanding Art and Understanding Persons', in *Objectivity and cultural divergence*, C.U.P. October 1984.
- 24 S. Kierkegaard - *Fear and Trembling*, trans. W. Lowrie, Princeton 1954, p. 69
- 25 S. Kierkegaard - *Either/Or*, Vol. 2, p. 133

76 *Frances Berenson*

- ²⁶ S. Kierkegaard - *Either/Or*, Vol. 2, p. 139
- ²⁷ S. Kierkegaard - *Either/Or*, 'Diapsalmata' Vol. 1 p. 22
- ²⁸ *op. cit.* Vol. 2 p. 116
- ²⁹ R.K. Elliott - 'The Critic and the Lover of Art' in *Linguistic Analysis and Phenomenology*, ed. S.C. Brown & W. Mays, Macmillan 1971
- ³⁰ P. Engelmann - *op. cit.* p. 109
- ³¹ L. Wittgenstein - *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics*, ed. C. Barrett, Basil Blackwell, Oxford 1967 p. 20
- ³² N. Malcolm - *Ludwig Wittgenstein - A Memoir*, O.U.P. 1958, p. 100.